DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 866 CS 208 834

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TITLE Stases, Common Topics and Lines of Argument for the Letter of Application: A Reader-Centered Heuristic Procedure.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (36th, Minneapolis, MN, March 21-23, 1985). Document contains microdot printing that may not reproduce clearly.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Analysis; *Business Correspondence; Employment Qualifications; Higher Education; *Job Application; *Persuasive Discourse; *Rhetoric; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness

ABSTRACT

The letter of application should make use of message strategies that show the writer's awareness of the explicit needs of specific readers. However, very few students are able to write them, partially as a result of the audience analysis procedures that are suggested for student use. Students need a reader analysis procedure to help them learn ways of framing messages that are reader adaptive. Classical rhetoric offers such procedures through stases, common topics, and potential lines of argument. Their sequence guides the writer from a general classification of the nature of the point of contention, through a limited list of questions for locating potential points of objection, to ways of framing arguments to deal with those points. For the letter of application, the common topics and lines of argument for existing positions might include such questions as, (1) What needs or requirements are made evident by the persuasive target? (2) What are the applicant's qualifications for the job? and (3) What are the disadvantages in the persuader's qualifications? By focusing the students' attention on potential objections, this system should help them gain insight into how others might view their qualifications and ways of dealing with objections. (HOD)

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STASES, COMMON TOPICS AND LINES OF ARGUMENT FOR THE LETTER OF APPLICATION: A READER-CENTERED HEURISTIC PROCEDURE

part of a panel on

INNOVATIVE METHODS OF TEACHING BUSINESS WRITING

presented by

Stephen M. Merrill

at

The national convention of the

CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION

in

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

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March 21 - 23, 1985

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Anyone who has taught resumes and letters of application in a business writing course has probably seen more than a few student-written letters that look like this:

August 13, 19--

Ms.Emily Watson
Laflin Technologies
Trenton, NJ 47830

Dear Ms. Watson:

Through the Purdue University Placement Center I have discovered that Laflin Technologies will be offering several intern positions this summer. I am very interested in one of the accounting positions and would like very much to be granted an interview with Laflin in Trenton.

I feel qualified for one of these positions in that I have completed courses in financial accounting, managerial accounting, corporate finance, and marketing management. I have also completed general education courses in history, psychology, English, calculus, computer science, and economics. After graduating from Purdue with a degree in accounting, I plan on taking the CPA exam or continuing my education in graduate school.

I am very anxious to begin a real work experience, and I feel that to work for Laflin Technologies this summer would be the best education I could ever hope for.

Sincerely,

There's nothing terribly wrong mechanically or grammatically with the letter, but still somehow it doesn't seem to be the kind of letter that would be very successful. The primary problem with it, at least according to my lights, is that, while it mentions the company's name several times through the length of the letter, the rationale for why the candidate should be engaged rests solely on what the writer has done, without any concern for what those activities mean for the reader. In essence, the letter is writer-centered rather than reader-centered in its

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approach.

A review of current business communications and job search texts on the writing of letters of application shows that most of them encourage the student to frame the letter in terms that show how the writer can meet the needs of the intended reader or the organization for which he or she works. An older but well-established text puts it this way: "As in sales letters, the infallible way to secure interest in your application letter is to stress your central selling point . . . about serving the reader." (Wilkinson, Clarke, and Wilkinson 346) These authors suggest that the writer incorporate "specific and special references to conditions or products or activities particular to the given job." (p. 350) Richard Lathrop in WHO'S HIRING WHO puts it even more emphatically: "Appeal in your letter to the self-interest of the person to whom you are writing. Include clues that indicate that hiring you will lead to higher production, greater efficiency, reduced waste, better sales, higher profits, etc.--that is things that will help solve the employer's problems and increase his/her own prospects for advancement." (Lathrop 134) In short, the letter of application should make use of message strategies that show the writer's awareness of the explicit needs of specific readers.

If the writing of highly adaptive letters of application is the goal, then why is it that very few of my students seem able to write them? Many of the students who enroll in the Business Writing course at Purdue seem very self-confident and very capable. And while they have worked hard to create the

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appropriate kind of academic and work background so that they will be attractive to potential employers, they don't seem to be able to write letters of application that show how that experience will benefit the reader. My presentation today reports on some of the research I have undertaken in an attempt to find heuristic procedures that would help novice writers to take on part of the perspective of their intended reader and to use that information to help them compose reader-centered letters of application. What I will do is critique current audience analytic procedures, describe what I think should be a better way to do things, and then describe a way of evaluating letters of application on the extent to which they show the writer's awareness of and adaptation to the needs of the reader.

For the purposes of my project, I assumed that the cause of the students' inability to write audience adaptive discourse lay in the kind of audience analysis procedures that were suggested for student use. The following checklist comes from what was then the current text that everyone teaching the Business Writing course used.

1. Who is the primary reader?
2. Who are the secondary readers?
3. How will the reader(s) use the document?
   As a reference guide to explain their obligations and rights?
   As a legal contract to be picked apart by courts and lawyers?
4. How often will the reader use the document?
   Occasionally, when an incident occurs?
   Occasionally, as a reference in explaining provisions to others?
5. What are the documents provisions?
   Are they new to the reader?
   Are they modifications of existing provisions?
6. What is the TECHNICAL BACKGROUND of the audience?
   Are they all professional in the same field?
   Are they professionals in different fields?

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Are they professionals and laymen?
Are they business people?
What is their educational background or socio-economic status?
Have they been exposed to comparable documents before?

7. What is the ATTITUDE of the audience?
Is the reader hostile to the document?
Does the reader see the document as beneficial, helpful?
Does the document ask for personal information?
Does the reader have any preconceived notions about the document that you must surmount?

8. What BEHAVIOR do you want as a result?
What reaction do you expect from the audience?

(Schutte and Steinberg 45-46)

This array of questions is intended to raise the writer's awareness of the reader, but I would argue that such a generalized approach to audience analysis will not press novice writers to find information necessary and appropriate for the production of adaptive discourse. Further, I would argue that as far a pedagogy is concerned, the locating of salient reader needs and attributes is only half of the picture. The other half is providing ways of presenting content so that it is reader-oriented, not writer-oriented. This entails some discussion of potential ways of casting the message or framing the argument that would be appropriate given the constraints of the rhetorical relationship. To put it another way: novice writers need access to a reader analysis rather than an audience analysis heuristic procedure, and they need to become aware of ways of framing messages so that they are reader adaptive.

Classical rhetoric offers methods for rhetors to use in the construction of deliberative and argumentative discourse, and these systems look at potential points of contention between the rhetor and his or her intended audience. These systems include stases, common topics and potential lines of arguement. Their

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sequence guides the rhetor from a general classification of the nature of the point of contention, through a limited list of questions for locating potential points of objection, to ways of framing arguments to deal with those points. Stases ask, "What is the nature of the point being contended? Is it a question of existence, definition, or quality?" Common topics ask: "Is there a need for action or change? Will a course of action designed to remedy the problem actually be effective? Does the proposed course of action have any serious drawbacks or flaws?" In a word, common topics are a conventionalized set of questions that the debater, intent on locating potential objections, uses when preparing a proposal for a given course of action. An elaborated example is provided by Nobles (Ehninger and Brockreide 161-168)

1. DOES THE NEED FOR A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN POLICY EXIST?

   A. Do serious problems exist and cause enough significant harm, quantitatively and qualitatively, to justify a change in policy?

   B. Do the alleged problems stem from and are they inherent in the present policy?

2. WILL THE PROPOSAL REMEDY SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS INHERENT IN THE PRESENT POLICY?

   A. Can the remedy be put into effect?

   B. Will the remedy create a workable system to replace the allegedly unworkable one?

3. CAN THE REMEDY BE APPLIED WITHOUT SERIOUS DISADVANTAGE?

   A. Can the proposal be put into effect without incurring disadvantageous effects?

   B. Do such results fail to justify rejecting the proposal?

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Finally, lines of argument are the potential messages that are suggested from the common topics, but I want to delay a discussion of examples until I can be more concrete.

With specific reference to letters of application, I suggest that the accepted classification of these letters--the prospecting letter as contrasted with the invited letter--could be depicted along fairly traditional rhetorical lines as residing in the first stases--existence--as a contrast of actual versus potential positions for which the writer could apply. This depiction, however, isn't sufficient for the novice writer. A more specific set of questions is needed that will allow a fuller view of the implications of the rhetorical situation, and this is where the common topics are used to elaborate the stases. For the letter of application, the common topics might look something like this:

COMMON TOPICS AND LINES OF ARGUMENT
FOR EXISTING POSITIONS

Common topics for analyzing situations where there is an actual position available.

1. What needs or requirements are made evident by the persuasive target?

   a. What are the target's specified, task-related skills prerequisite for the position?
   b. What prerequisite aptitudes or attributes does the target specify for the position?
   c. In what ways are these skills, aptitudes and attributes essential for the position in question?

2. What are the applicant's qualifications for the job?

   a. What skills, aptitudes, and attributes does the persuader possess that are relevant to the needs of the target?
   b. In what ways do those skills, aptitudes, and

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attributes qualify the persuader for the position?

c. In what places or situations has the persuader already used these skills, aptitudes, and attributes?

d. Are there other skills, aptitudes or attributes that make him/her especially qualified for the position?

3. What are the disadvantages in the persuader's qualifications?

a. What deficiencies are there in the persuader's qualifications?

b. What drawbacks are there in the persuader's qualifications?

c. Are the deficiencies and drawbacks sufficient to warrant not deciding in his/her favor?

The attendant potential lines of argument might look something like this:

1.a Define what the specified skills for the position are.

1.b Define what the specified aptitudes or attributes for the position are.

1.c Explain how the skills, aptitudes or attributes are essential for performance in the position.

2.a List the skills, aptitudes, and attributes that the persuader possesses.

2.b Use the skills, aptitudes, and attributes that the persuader possesses to explain his/her appropriateness for the position.

2.c Use the situations or places where the persuader has demonstrated effective use of his/her skills.

2.d Use other skills, aptitudes, or attributes that the persuader possesses which offer proof of competence or further advantage to the persuasive target.

3.a List the potentially negative aspects of the persuader's credentials.

3.b. Demonstrate that one or more of these potentially negative aspects are not

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detrimental to the persuader's case.
-they are actually advantages not disadvantages, or
-they do not significantly diminish the persuader's other qualifications

There are four points about the potential lines of argument that need to be made here. The first is that not all of the potential lines of argument will be workable or useful; their function is to provide the rhetor with a range of options which need to be evaluated within the confines of the specific rhetorical situation. The second point is that the list is merely suggestive not exhaustive. Again, the constraints of the situation can readily suggest other lines of thought. The third is that this list (and indeed the whole procedure) is designed for writers who do not already have an established reputation or relationship with the reader: it is for those who need to build the case that they are a suitable candidate for employment. Finally, by focusing novice writers' attention on potential objections this system should help them gain some insight into how others might view their qualifications and give them some practice with conventional ways of dealing with those objections.

What I have done so far is to suggest that the accepted procedure for audience analysis is in need of refinement if it to offer the learner any substantial help in writing reader-centered discourse. What I would like to do to finish here is to describe an evaluation procedure that would be appropriate given the nature of the problem. Research by Jesse G. Delia, Ruth Anne Clark and others has focused on children, adolescent and adult formulations of persuasive messages. These researchers have devised and tested a theoretically motivated, hierarchically

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arranged coding scheme for describing the extent to which naturally generated messages show the speaker's awareness of and adaptation to the needs of specific listeners. Reformulated in terms of the letter of application, this scheme yields a coding guide that looks like this:

I. No discernable recognition of or adaptation to the target's perspective

1. Statement of the persuader's interests, needs or wants only

2. Unsupported or unelaborated assertion of the persuader's appropriateness as a candidate for the position

II. Implicit recognition of and adaptation to the target's perspective--focus only on the writer's credentials

3. Elaboration of applicant's background with seemingly no regard for the needs or interests of the persuasive target

4. Elaboration of the applicant's qualifications with regard for the general needs of the persuasive target--use of data that would be appropriate for any candidate for this position

III. Explicit recognition of and adaptation to the target's perspective--focus on meeting the target's needs

5. Elaboration of specific advantages or consequences that will accrue to the organization that hires the persuader

6. Elaboration of specific advantages or consequences that will accrue to the target for hiring the persuader

Use of a coding guide such as this, along with rationales provided by the writer explaining what specific features of the text he or she sees as being persuasive, would give us a clear picture of our students' ability to adapt discourse to reader

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needs. Correlated with evaluations by expert readers--professionals in personnel management, for example--this information might be able to tell us what would actually be more or less persuasive in letters of application written by college students, which is, in the end, the goal for our efforts.

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